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Semiramis in History and Legend:

a case study in interpretation of an Assyrian historical tradition, with observations on archetypes in ancient historiography, on euhemerism before Euhemerus, and on the so-called Greek ethnographic style¹

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This paper seeks to show that a background of genuine historical events lies behind legends of the Assyrian queen Semiramis. The background allows conflation between two or perhaps three queens to be untangled. Assyrian historical writings connected with those times show some of the features normally identified as Hellenistic, allowing us to discard the idea that those legends were constructed by Greeks in the Persian and Seleucid periods. The conflation may not result from confusion but from the ancient Mesopotamian concept of archetypes, according to which ideal institutions and offices in heaven had their examples from time to time on earth. This understanding would imply that Semiramis was the name used for any powerful queen who represented the archetype, with more or less divine status. The archetypes were controlled by the sages who took the form of fish-man and fish-woman composites. This is a connection that may explain the fishy aspect of the legend.

Herodotus (I 185) recognised two great queens of Assyria. "The earlier, Semiramis, preceding the later by five generations", was a character long recognised as Sammu-ramat, the wife of Shamshi-Adad V and mother of Adad-nerari III. Herodotus named the later queen "Nitocris", confusedly taking the name from a 7th century Egyptian princess, the daughter of Psammetichus I.² Other writers such as Diodorus Siculus conflated the two queens and called both of them "Semiramis." Scholars attempting to unravel the legends attached to the name of Semiramis have agreed that "Nitocris" is the name used for Sennacherib's second wife Naqia, who lived some five generations later than Sammu-ramat, just as Herodotus said, and that Naqia's building works at Babylon are mainly the same as those attributed to "Semiramis" by Diodorus (II.7–10).³ There is a third woman possibly to be picked out from the conflation: Friedrich König recognised Sargon II in some of the deeds of Ninus. He was the Assyrian king to whom Semiramis was married, according to legends attributed to Cle-

¹ I would like to thank Jane Lightfoot, Peter Kingsley and Erich Gruen for contributing in various ways to this paper.

² She became the God's Wife of Amun, and so one of the most distinguished women of her generation.

³ Lewy 1952, 264ff, accepted by Pettinato 1985, 26, not apparently known to Vanderhoof 1999, 196 n. 282.

law of Sammu-ramat, fought against a king of Urartu named Arramu. The latter campaign was perhaps the most famous conducted by that long-lived king. Since Urartu is located precisely in the area later known as Armenia, we can be almost certain that the Armenian legend echoes a historical situation.⁸ Arramu was succeeded by Sarduri I who had founded a new dynasty by 832; the names of Arramu's sons are unknown.⁹ Sammu-ramat's husband Shamshi-Adad V reigned for a mere thirteen years, but her son Adad-nerari III ruled for longer, twenty eight years. The son officially conducted campaigns on the border of Urartu¹⁰ against Argishti I, whose father king Menua is credited with building the so-called "Semiramis canal," according to his own inscriptions, which are still *in situ* by the canal.¹¹ Thus Sammu-ramat, our first Semiramis, is contemporary with a construction later named after her.

One perplexing aspect of the legends is Semiramis' connection with Ascalon and the cult of fish. According to Diodorus Siculus (II.4–5), Derketo the mother of Semiramis was a goddess who turned into a fish.¹² Where does this curious mixture come from? Again, Assyrian sources from the time of Sammu-ramat may contribute at least a part of the answer. We know from the Eponym Chronicle for 788 that the foundations of a new temple dedicated to the god Nabu were laid at Nineveh, and that Nabu entered his new temple in 787.¹³ At nearby Nimrud in the temple of Nabu two statues were dedicated to Nabu by the governor Bel-tarsi-iluma (who served as eponym official in 797), "for the life of Adad-nerari III and for the life of Sammu-ramat".¹⁴ Great stone figures at the doorways included mermen and mermaids.¹⁵ Thus we have a connexion for the early 8th century between Sammu-ramat, the first Semiramis, and mermaid iconography.

A connection of Nabu with fish or fish-man composite creatures is not widespread, and one may suggest that it was introduced to illustrate the new status of Nabu as "sage", *apkallu*, a title first attested in the reign of Adad-nerari III, son of Sammu-ramat. According to Mesopotamian tradition, the first *apkallu*-sages rose up from the sea to bring the arts of civilisation from the gods to mankind. These arts and institutions, known in Sumerian as *me*, consisted of archetypes or concepts, and included kingship, priesthood, warfare, scribal art, and various craft skills.¹⁶ The sage took the form of a fish body with a human head beneath the fish head. The description corresponds to a figure shown on certain Assyrian and Babylonian seals, sculptures and figurines, and is some-

⁸ Pettinato 1985, 27–28.

⁹ Radner 1998, 132–133.

¹⁰ The viceroy Shamshi-ilu led at least part of the campaign, see Grayson 1996, 232–33.

¹¹ Salvini 1992.

¹² Weinfeld 1991 proposed that Derketo should be understood from Ugaritic *drt* "dominion" and Sammu-ramat as its lexical equivalent *šmm rmm* "high heavens". See below, with note 45.

¹³ Millard 1994, 60.

¹⁴ Grayson 1996, 226–227.

¹⁵ Mallowan 1966, 235.

¹⁶ Farber 1987–90, 610.

times depicted together with mermen and mermaids.¹⁷ Was there a temple to Nebo (West Semitic Nabu) at Ascalon with similar iconography? No evidence for such a cult has been found by excavation. Weinfeld has supposed that the historical Sammu-ramat, whose name he thought was a West Semitic one, was a princess from Ascalon.¹⁸ But this seems unlikely because the Philistine cities were still far beyond Assyrian imperial ambition in the 9th century, and the Assyrian king would probably not have wasted a royal marriage upon a city of slight diplomatic weight. We still do not know why the legendary Semiramis was linked with Ascalon.

Sammu-ramat, the first historical Semiramis, held the title *MĪ.Ē.GAL* "palace woman" of the king, during the reign of her husband and during that of her son. Although the title is sometimes translated "queen" when followed by a king's name, in fact it usually includes the status of queen mother as well as the current ruler's consort. This meant that she was an exceptionally powerful woman who succeeded in maintaining the top position despite presumed rivalry from her daughter-in-law. If this phenomenon is comparable to that of the Hittite Tawannanna, she would have become high priestess at an important temple when she was widowed, and the temple of Nabu at Nimrud is a good candidate because of the two statues with their joint dedication. This possibility may be an ingredient in the deification of the queen in later legend. More solid as evidence is the stela inscribed with her name, found among the stelae of Assyrian kings and two other, later, queens at Assur. Miglus has shown that they were carefully discarded from a temple where they stood as adorants;¹⁹ a text listing statues of deities in Assur's temple includes a statue or stela of a king among deities²⁰. Such a placing for the stela of Sammu-ramat would have given her the status of a lesser divinity.

There is no apparent link between Sammu-ramat and Babylon. Recent research maintains that Adad-nerari III reinstated as king of Babylon Baba-abu-iddina, whom Shamshi-Adad V had deposed, and there is no evidence that either Assyrian king was involved in major building works there.²¹ The reinstallation has left no echo in stories about Semiramis.

The second Semiramis is more problematic. Much of the suggested evidence is ambiguous. König, who edited the *Persica* of Ctesias, interpreted a selection of details in the account of Diodorus Siculus (II.1–3), to argue that Ninus' deeds included echoes of the deeds of Sargon II. His earlier work, editing Urtian inscriptions, had given him an exceptionally detailed background in neo-Assyrian history. The gist of his arguments runs as follows:

1. Sargon, like Ninus, conquered Babylon before "modern" Babylon was built, i.e. before the rebuilding done by Esarhaddon, Assurbanipal and Nebuchadnezzar II.

¹⁷ e.g. Collon 2001, no. 182; Herbordt 1992 Tafel 15.4.

¹⁸ Weinfeld 1991, 53; and see below, note 45.

¹⁹ Miglus 1984, 133–140.

²⁰ Menzel 1981, vol. II, T 147.

²¹ Finkel and Reade, 2000/69, new reading of the Synchronistic Chronicle, II, 15–20.

2. Sargon recorded his conquest of Muṣaṣir in southern Urartu, cult centre of the great god Haldi, in a long poetic-epic letter, when its king was Urzana, whom König equated with Diodorus' Barzanes.²² This seems to me to be his strongest argument.
3. Sargon conquered Daiukku, a ruler of the Mannay whom some scholars identified with Deioces, called by Herodotus the first king of the Medes. König identified this with the campaign of Ninus against the Mede Pharnos. He interpreted Pharnos as the Old Persian *farnah*, a quality ascribed to Persian kings in the time of Herodotus, but not restricted to Deioces.²³
4. Ninus was said to have built a new capital city, and this is true of Sargon II and of no other king in the 8th–7th centuries BC. This interpretation ignores the possibility that "build" stands for "rebuild".
5. König thought that Ninus was a corruption of Kinos, under the influence of the etymologising that associated him with the name of Nineveh. Diodorus said that Ninus gave his own name to the city, and this is what Sargon did in naming his new capital Dur-Šarrukin. However, there is no hard evidence that Ninus was ever known as Kinos, either in Greek or in Akkadian.

There is a little more support for identifying aspects of Ninus with Sargon II. Orosius, a Spanish priest contemporary with Augustine of Hippo, wrote in his polemic against the pagans that Ninus died in battle,²⁴ and this fits well with what is securely known of Sargon II who died in battle in Cilicia.²⁵ The event has importance in Christian tradition because (as is now often thought) Isaiah 14:3–21 records it. Orosius was so keen to vilify the pagans that he claimed Ninus drank human blood instead of milk, no doubt giving reason for Jerome to translate the Son of the Dawn as Lucifer. Orosius also said, as did Diodorus Siculus (II.7), that Semiramis built a mausoleum for Ninus after his death. It may be possible to locate this monument, for a tomb-like structure is shown on Roman coins from Tarsus which are connected with the cult of Marduk-Santa, patron god of Tarsus.²⁶ This cult was established, according to Berossus,²⁷ by Sennacherib, son of Sargon. An equation of Ninus with Sargon II would suggest that his wife Atalya may be a second Semiramis, but this cannot be considered certain.

The third Semiramis. It is generally agreed that "Nitocris" is the name used by Herodotus for Sennacherib's second wife Naqia.²⁸ During the reign of Sennacherib, Nineveh was magnificently enlarged, with new walls, city gates, and two

²² This was previously suggested by Lewy 1952, 269, although she maintained that Ninus stood for Sennacherib rather than Sargon.

²³ A link between Herodotus' Deioces and Daiuku the Median king of Šupardu in Sargon's reign is now preferred to a link with the Mannayan ruler Daiukku, Radner 1999 s.v. Daiuku and Daiukku. This is an unimportant adjustment from the point of view of König's argument.

²⁴ Oros. 1.4.1–8.

²⁵ Pettinato 1985, 61.

²⁶ Goldman 1941 and Dalley 1999.

²⁷ Burstein 1978, 24.

²⁸ Eilers 1971; Pettinato 1985. The contemporary cuneiform sources for Naqia are thoroughly discussed by Melville 1999. See also Baker 2001, s.v. Naqia.

palaces,²⁹ although the role played by Naqia in these deeds is not known. At Babylon, on the other hand, her building works during the reign of her son Esarhaddon are known from contemporary Assyrian royal inscriptions in which her role was acknowledged publicly, an advertisement which is not known for any other Mesopotamian queen. Given that Greek writers sometimes confused Nineveh and Babylon, it is not always possible to separate the two cities in legends about Semiramis, but in some cases details suggest which city is meant when Herodotus or Diodorus attributes building works to Nitocris or to Semiramis. One of several reasons for confusion between Nineveh and Babylon arises from the indisputable fact that Naqia was queen in Nineveh, yet helped her son Esarhaddon to undertake great building works in Babylon.³⁰

A series of details from the classical authors corresponds to deeds recorded in Sennacherib's own inscriptions:

1. The description in Herodotus (I.185) corresponds to the water engineering works which Sennacherib undertook to bring mountain water to Nineveh, according to his Bavian inscription.³¹
2. The method of construction of a bridge which Herodotus (I.188–189) attributes to Nitocris but Diodorus (II.8.1–3) to Semiramis, corresponds to details given in inscriptions of Sennacherib.³²
3. The description of mechanical devices for opening gates related by Diodorus (II.8.7), corresponds to Sennacherib's mechanical sluice gates in the Bavian inscription.
4. The account in Diodorus (II.16.6–7) of how Phoenicians made river boats for a campaign against Bactria may be related to Sennacherib's own account of how he had boats built by Phoenicians in Til Barsip for his campaign in southern Babylonia.
5. Walls and gates of Babylon described by Herodotus (III.155) are comparable to those built by Sennacherib at Nineveh.³³
6. The description in Diodorus (II.8.3), supposedly referring to Babylon, of the palace sculpture showing "Semiramis" hunting a lion, corresponds to wall sculptures of Assurbanipal in the North Palace built by Sennacherib, on which beardless persons wearing jewellery, and riding on horseback, take active part in a lion hunt.
7. The two palaces built by the river (Euphrates) at "Babylon" in Diodorus (II.8.3) may refer to the SW and N palaces built by Sennacherib at Nineveh, both overlooking the river (Tigris) there.
8. Diodorus named Semiramis' husband as Ninus and her son as Ninyas. Both have names that can be etymologised as derived from Nineveh. This was not

²⁹ See Reade 1998–2001, 411–416.

³⁰ Confusion between Babylon and Nineveh starting from the inscriptions of Sennacherib was discussed in several papers delivered at the *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* held in London in 2003.

³¹ Jacobsen and Lloyd, 1935, 36–7.

³² e.g. Frahm, 1997 62–64, 78 and 83.

³³ Lewy 1952.

alive, supporting her grandson in his role as world conqueror. It was Assurbanipal's sack of Susa, capital of the Elamites, which lies behind the awful slaughter carried out by Esther in the Hebrew story.³⁸

In a letter written to Esarhaddon, Naqia is referred to in exceptional terms: "The mother of the king is as clever as Adapa".³⁹ Adapa, also called Oannes, was the first sage, *apkallu*, one of those characters traditionally represented as men wearing fish-cloaks. Adapa was also a priest, and since we have 7th century sculptures of men wearing a fish-cloak, it is possible that the compliment paid in the letter refers to a cultic ceremony when Naqia wore such a garment and was honoured with a rare status. At the time of the first Semiramis in the 9th century, as we have seen, the god Nabu was credited with being a sage; and statues of two mermaids in the temple of Nabu at Nimrud are mentioned in an administrative text of the late 8th century.⁴⁰ This is a possible, if very tentative, connection of the third Semiramis with fish. The connections with the sage tradition, shown above for both the first and third Semiramis queens, find resonance in a classical source: in the name of Onnes, husband of Semiramis according to Diodorus Siculus (II.5). The suggestion that Onnes is a mild corruption of Oannes, the first sage, Sumerian *DA-AN*, was first made in 1887.⁴¹

The idea that Semiramis became a goddess after her death is recorded by Diodorus (II.14). It rests on the authority of an oracle delivered in Egypt from the shrine of Amon in the Siwa oasis: "that she would disappear from among men and receive undying honour among some of the peoples of Asia". "Some, making a myth of it, say that she turned into a dove and flew off in the company of many birds which alighted on her dwelling, and this, they say, is the reason why the Assyrians worship the dove as a god, thus deifying Semiramis" (II.20). This has been discounted because it seems to be an example of that Hellenistic phenomenon, euhemerism, according to which mortal rulers who lived in the distant past were thought to have become divine.

The idea, in fact, had a long history in the Near East well before the arrival of Hellenism. For example, Gilgamesh was distinctly mortal yet became god of the Underworld; and certain Mesopotamian kings such as Shulgi of Ur and Naram-Sin of Agade were deified before their death. A slightly different form of the idea comes from the tradition that the gods were once on the earth and did the deeds now performed by mortals. In the *Legend of Etana* the gods were said to have built the city of Kish; in the *Epic of Creation* Marduk and the other gods slaved to make bricks and to build Babylon; in the *Epic of Atrahasis* the gods formed rivers and cities: the city Assur bears the name of its own god, as does the city Anat on the middle Euphrates; an inscription of the Old Babylonian king Yahdun-Lim from Mari on the middle Euphrates refers to the time long past "when the god

³⁸ Dalley, forthcoming, provisional title *Revenge at Susa. From Sennacherib to Esther*.

³⁹ Parpola 1993, no. 244.

⁴⁰ Dalley and Postgate 1984, 95 B: 28.

⁴¹ Lehmann-Haupt in 1910 thought there was no simple identification, see Eilers 1971, 52 n. 90.

physical geography of the area, the climate, livestock, agricultural and mineral produce, the origins and features of the inhabitants and the political, social and military organisation, we find aspects of most of these in the accounts of Assyria in which the deeds of Semiramis are recounted, as given by Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus.⁴⁷ A late 8th century BC example can be found in the letter written to the gods of Assyria by Sargon II:⁴⁸

"I departed from the land Ushulish. I drew near to Ushqaya, a great fort heading the Urartian frontier, which bars the pass of Zaranda region like a door and holds back messengers, and stands out like a needle on Mallau, a mountain of firs, and is clothed in radiance spreading over the land of Subi; the people who live in that region within Urartu, all of them, are unequalled for their ability with cavalry horses; every year they take colts, very young steeds born in their broad country, which they raise for their royal regiment, to such an extent that they are not taken to Subi, the region of Urartian people called Mannayan, until their performance has been seen: nobody has yet mounted them and going forwards, turning around and going backwards as needed for battle has not yet been demonstrated: harness has still not been fixed on." (lines 167–173).

Do confusion and conflation account for the three Semiramis queens? An intentional explanation may be suggested. We have noted the connection of the first and third Semiramis characters with sages, and the ancient tradition of archetypes for kingship etc. Presumably "queenship" could be an addition to this wide-ranging category. A striking feature of ancient Mesopotamian history is the naming of a new king after a much earlier king of a different dynasty to whom he was unrelated. Sargon, Naram-Sin, and Nebuchadnezzar are three obvious examples. In the first instance the second Sargon seems to have adopted and reused legends attached to the first Sargon, who had lived more than 1,500 years earlier.⁴⁹ This may imply an understanding of history in which an ideal or archetype was thought to lie behind similarities. Other instances include the archetypal Flood, which stands for the many floods that took place in various places and locations;⁵⁰ and the use of schematic chronology alongside literal chronology, both in Mesopotamia⁵¹ and in Biblical literature,⁵² finding its way from Assyria into Lydia.⁵³ For Semiramis stories, Diodorus would have taken the archetype for historical fact, whereas Herodotus separated two literal examples from the archetype.

New evidence from Assyria helps to disentangle a historical kernel within legends about Semiramis, and to distinguish probably three Assyrian queens. The very ancient Sumerian tradition of archetypes may account for the confusion or fusion of more than one woman into the category of superlative queenship.

⁴⁷ Note that similar features, sometimes ascribed to Greek influence, are found in writings attributed to Berossos who mentioned Semiramis as a ruler of Assyria.

⁴⁸ Text using Mayer 1983; own translation.

⁴⁹ Horowitz 1988, 165.

⁵⁰ Mallowan 1964, 62–82.

⁵¹ Brinkman 1976, 8 n. 5.

⁵² Hughes 1990, 2 taking up observations made by Julius Wellhausen.

⁵³ Burkett 1995.

This evaluation goes along with the recognition that euhemerism and ethnographic description can be found in Assyrian literature in the 8th and 7th centuries, and do not necessarily mark a Hellenistic composition.

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